

Quantitative Influences on the Presentation of Qualitative Articles

Many aspects of qualitative inquiry that we both accept and expect to see in our articles have found their way there by default, as habits moved across from quantitative inquiry. These features need to be highlighted, examined, and commented on, because they are so standard in qualitative inquiry that reviewers take them for granted, yet they are incongruent with our aims. Even qualitative researchers who are trying to break from the quantitative mold often find these components requested in the review process and are forced to comply and provide them in their publications.

Style of writing. The first, and the most resisted, habit is the removal of the self from the writing. Quantitative researchers' dispassionate, third-person presentation of research is most common, despite the efforts of some groups of qualitative researchers to place the self into the manuscript.

QHR does not have a policy recommending how you present yourself in your manuscripts, other than requesting that you be consistent. My own editorial policy is "hands off." I believe that requiring standardized formats in style and in the presentation of abstracts makes for boring reading. As long as authors meet basic grammatical rules, the choice about the way you write your manuscripts is yours. Reviewers may make suggestions for change, but the bottom line is that it is your article, and these suggestions are only suggestions, not required changes.

Descriptions of the sample. When I survey *QHR* articles, another of my concerns is the amount of space allocated to the quantitative-type description of the participants. In quantitative inquiry, study samples are described in quantitative terms, as it enables the comparison of the sample with the population from which the sample was randomly selected to assess for any bias, and for comparison with other studies. In qualitative research, because of the purposeful selection nature of sampling, such comparisons are not legitimate. Rather, we need descriptions of participants that

enable us to evaluate the *theoretical* representiveness of the participants. Thus the intent of the descriptions of the sample should be to describe the participant's role, experience, or other pertinent information, so that the study can be evaluated for any limitations in scope, its comprehensiveness, degree of saturation, and undesirable bias. Yet our quantitative habits have us reporting on demographic, rather than experiential, characteristics and are based on the assumption that the indicators used (age, gender, marital status, occupation, diseases, and so forth) are representative of some particular class of person. Although this strategy might be necessary for the attainment and description of the initial sample—when the parameters of the topic are not known—it is not appropriate for use with the theoretical sample.

Organization of the article. There is also a norm of clearly separating the findings or results from the discussion section, thereby keeping any reference to the literature out of the findings. Some qualitative methodologists and some reviewers consider this advantageous, as it removes any evidence that the literature has led the analysis, thereby contributing evidence that analytic processes were inductive. Other researchers prefer to bring the literature into the findings. They have considered the literature as data and as a means of comparing, testing, and sensitizing themselves to emerging concepts. The latter approach is more common in some disciplines than others. For instance, in submissions from researchers from anthropology in particular, this approach is more evident.

What are real limitations? I am always crossing out *limitations* in qualitative submissions, in which the authors are apologizing for not having a random sample. They write that because of this perceived limitation, findings are not generalizable to the population or to other groups.

Now, let's think about this "limitation" for a moment. If you have developed a concept or theory, your intent was not to develop something that was quantitatively representative but to develop the concept

or the theory as completely as possible, to represent the *phenomena*. Remember, in qualitative inquiry, generalizability is attained through the development of *meaning*. If you have developed your concepts well, they should be recognizable in other places, in other groups, and in other situations. Now if you selected a demographically nonrandom sample, does the nonrandomness of your sample restrict the generalizability of your study? Probably *not*; in fact the reverse is true. A random sample would have restricted the development and understanding of your concept and limited its generalizability. Why? Think about this; discuss it in class.

Another commonly listed limitation is that further quantitative research is needed to *test* our solid, qualitatively verified theory, quantitatively. Is quantitative research needed to *test* our theory? No—not if you have developed the theory with a saturated sample and have conducted your analysis thoughtfully, following the principles of qualitative inquiry. Subsequent quantitative research might be desirable to show the distribution of your concepts in the population or to move

toward measurement of the concept, but such next steps are not limitations of your qualitative study and do not diminish its significance.

These are some of the quantitative practices that have influenced the presentation of qualitative inquiry. As we develop confidence in qualitative inquiry, we will slowly leave these unhelpful requirements behind and develop our own distinct qualitative style of presenting our research. Meanwhile, let us consciously write against normative presentation. If any of these quantitative features are requested by a reviewer, remember that it is your article, and changes should be made not simply because they were requested but thoughtfully and with deliberation. Remember what you are trying to convey in your article and why, and move forward with confidence. For it is you who are developing qualitative inquiry, and it is your articles that are forming the foundation of the method.

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